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## ENGLAND AND MARK TWAIN.

BY BRITANNICUS.

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ENGLISHMEN for forty years and more have loved Mark Twain with an ardor very little below that of his own countrymen. Ever since the "Jumping Frog" made its appearance he has been to them the supreme example of humor in its most piquant, most American form, and the unrivalled guardian, since Charles Dickens died, of the sources of deep, human, elemental laughter. It is possible, indeed, that Englishmen have profited by just the shade of mental difference that separates the two peoples to extract from Mark Twain's humor a more exquisite relish than even the Americans themselves, for whom its flavor can scarcely have the charm of an exotic. The tussle with the German language, the duel in the "Tramp Abroad," the trials of an urban editor of an agricultural paper, the forty-seven-mile search in the dark for the lost bedroom slipper, the ascent of the Riffelberg with the mule that ate the nitroglycerine; these and a hundred other inimitable passages that leap to the mind when Mark Twain's name is breathed have won in England an appreciation as keen and diffused as in America. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are as much the friends of English as of American boyhood. Humor has as many styles and fashions as dress, and it would be almost an impertinence to predict for Mark Twain the immortality of a Cervantes; but this much may at least be said, that forty shifting and convulsive years instead of impairing have enhanced Mark Twain's popularity with his English readers. There is that in his writings which draws one as much to the man as to the author, and it is not merely for his books, but for the spirit and character revealed in them and for all they have heard of his life and its trials and triumphs that Englishmen feel in Mark Twain a tender and semi-proprietary pride. We have long been used to looking upon him as the national author

of America. In England we have had for a generation or more no national author. Tennyson, perhaps, came nearer to being one than any other writer, but even Tennyson never commanded the devotion that the Scotch showered on Sir Walter, the English of fifty years ago on Dickens and the Americans on Mark Twain. And having no national author of our own, we have perforce claimed Mark Twain as *the* representative "racial" author of his day and have felt for him only a little less admiration, gratitude and affection than his own countrymen. To writers alone is it given to win and hold a sentiment of this quality—to writers and occasionally, by the oddness of the human mind, to generals. The "popularity" of statesmen is a poor and flickering light by the side of this full flame of personal affection. It has gone out to Mark Twain from all the English-speaking peoples not only for what he has written, for the clean, irresistible extravagance of his humor and his unfailing command of the primal feelings, for his tenderness, his jollity and his power to read the heart of boy and man and woman; not only for the tragedies and afflictions of his life so unconquerably borne; not only for his brave and fiery dashes against tyranny, humbug and corruption at home and abroad, but also because, beyond any other man of his time, he incarnated and universalized the American spirit. His humor, while wholly and distinctively American, has the large human qualities, the sense of the fundamental contrasts of life, that overflows all national boundaries. His freshness of heart and emotion beneath a show of merry cynicism, his indomitable common sense, his spiritual hardiness, his touch of misanthropy, his idealizing faith in women and democracy—all that is American too; but it is Americanism carried by genius to a point where it appeals to the whole of humanity. More than any man of our generation has Mark Twain made the world laugh. But his humor has always been on the side of the angels. He has jibed at much, but never at anything that made for nobility.

No doubt there are some Englishmen who still regard him as a mere *farceur*, who find his "irreverence" an insuperable stumbling-block and who cannot reconcile themselves to a famous man of letters being so precisely the opposite of a literary man. "Culture," literary priggishness and the academic type of criticism will always find it hard to accept Mark Twain at his true value. One English critic some years ago summed him up, or

thought he did, in the word "barbarian," declaring that the essence of his talent was merely the spirit of vandalism; and the reproach of not being an "artist" will, no doubt, long be hurled at him by the men who are all sensitiveness and little sense. But the average reader of Mark Twain's works, which is much the same as saying the average man or woman throughout the English-speaking world, is wiser than the most acute of critics in trusting his own instincts and discarding the foot-rule of formalism. He came stark into the world of letters; there is no precedent for him; and he brought with him the spirit of the Mississippi Valley as it was fifty or sixty years, a spirit scarcely congenial to the pedants of aestheticism. "It is becoming difficult already," wrote an Englishman the day after Mark Twain's death, "to conceive the conditions amid which he grew up in the Mississippi Valley—a frontier settlement where life was hard, happy-go-lucky and self-reliant, and the men and women who lived it were fraternal and kindly; where an absolute irreverence of speech and manner went hand in hand with a real Puritanism of outlook and conduct; where the atmosphere was charged with courage, a reckless surplusage of cheerfulness, spontaneous vigor, comradeship, profanity, homespun idealism, and a total innocence of the conventions, the arts, the standards and the boredom of civilization. That was the school in which Mark Twain graduated. It formed him in the decisive years when the lines of character are unalterably laid down, and he repaid its wholesome discipline by portraying it with the intimacy of a lover and the touch of a reporter of genius. As journeyman printer, prospector, miner, pilot, soldier and journalist he saw it from all sides. Its spirit became his spirit." That I believe to be true; but one can understand how often a writer of such upbringing, standpoint and instincts must have shocked the measured delicacy of English "culture." To appreciate Mark Twain the less one has in one's composition of the professional critic and the more of the elemental qualities of humanity the better. Happily, most of us are human beings before we are critics; and Mark Twain, if the supercilious few grudge his title to fame, will always carry with him the devoted responsiveness of warm-hearted many. A few lapses from the highest taste, a few things one might wish had been said differently—what are they against that brimming treasure of wholesomeness, masculinity and exuberant mirth?

It is, of course, as a humorist that Mark Twain has conquered the world and fairly enslaved the English-speaking peoples. No one on either side of the Atlantic has arisen in the past thirty years to challenge his uncontested supremacy as the dispenser of joyousness and mirth—of mirth now mocking, now tender, now whirling through a riot of extravagance, now vital with the sense of tears in mortal things, now tipped with a ferocity of sarcasm, but always clean, fresh, whimsical and fortifying. The obituary notices that have appeared in the English papers do full justice to this side of his genius. But they are, happily, not less inconsistent on the absurdity of looking upon Mark Twain as a humorist merely. He never sank into the tiresomeness of “the funny man.” “It takes,” says one English writer, “a man of courage, of sympathy, of experience, a man with a heart and a sense of the pathos and tragedy of life, to be a great humorist. Mark Twain was all this; an irreclaimable jester like Artemus Ward was precisely what he could never have been. He was too big a man and too responsible, and kept with him too constant a vision of life’s broadest and most fundamental contrasts to sink into an habitual fun-maker. It is true, perhaps, that at the mention of his name the mind leaps first of all to the passages in which he gave fancy the freest rein. But these are not the passages, admirable as they are in flow, light-heartedness and abandon, that give the full measure of the man. Indeed, if you were to leave out from his works everything in which Mark Twain set out to be deliberately, wantonly, irresistibly side-splitting, I am not sure that his highest merits as a writer would not stand out more clearly. He was the very Homer of boyhood; he wove some historical romances of an extraordinary imaginative delicacy; he depicted life on the Mississippi with a force and picturesqueness and fidelity that in years to come will make men turn to him as the social historian of his place and time; he had encountered men and women under a unique diversity of conditions and at the closest range; he saw into them with the penetration of a man of the widest human sympathies and of a genuine dramatist; and he drew them, and drew their surroundings, with the direct, telling, vigorous and, at the same time, elaborated impressionism that with him was a gift of nature.”

Three years ago England showed Mark Twain how much she loved him, how high a place he held as a writer and a man in the

heart of the nation. I was with him frequently in those memorable weeks. He invited me to study him at leisure and completely, in order that I might know "what a real American college boy looks like." The impression I gathered was that "a real American college boy," in the seventy-second year of his youth, would rather stand than sit, rather walk than stand, rather smoke than sleep and rather talk than do anything. The welcome he received was one continuous ovation. His humor was never happier nor his zest in life more abounding; the interest in all he did and said reached literally through all classes of society. At the Royal garden-party at Windsor, where the guests included with hardly an exception all the most famous men and women in England, Mark Twain admittedly was the most popular man present. As he drove from the station to the castle he was kept incessantly bowing in response to the delighted cheers of the crowds that lined the streets—a purely popular crowd of sight-seers and holiday-makers, who recognized Mark Twain as easily as they recognized the Prime Minister, and considerably more easily than they recognized the Archbishop of Canterbury, and gave him a greeting that must have touched his heart. Half the notable men and women of the land hurried across the lawns to welcome him, and the King and Queen honored him with a far larger portion of their time and conversation than they spared for any of their other guests. At the House of Commons, at the dinner given in his honor by the American Ambassador and attended by much of what is best in the world of English letters, at the luncheon in his honor given by the Pilgrim's Club when his health was proposed by Mr. Birrell in one of the happiest, wittiest and most graceful and feeling speeches I have ever listened to, at Oxford where the degree of D. Litt. was conferred upon him to the uproarious delight of the undergraduates who formed a cheering bodyguard around him whenever he appeared in the streets—it was just the same: by every possible means in their power the English people made of his visit a demonstration of their affection and regard. Nor are they a people whose affection and regard are lightly given. Mark Twain had won them as a great writer, a great citizen and a great gentleman; and his passing leaves a vacancy in the hearts of a world-scattered race that will not soon or easily be filled.

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